

The Skull on the Shelf that Bares My Name by nervoussis

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Canon-Typical Violence, Drag, Good Sibling Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Homophobic Language, It's the 1990s, M/M, Neil Hargrove's A+ Parenting, Non-binary Billy Hargrove, Self-Discovery, Steve doesn't understand things, but he tries

Language: English

Characters: Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Neil Hargrove

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2020-10-17

Updated: 2021-07-30

Packaged: 2022-03-31 10:20:50

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Chapters: 2

Words: 6,405

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Billy stood awkwardly in front of the mirror in the bathroom and tried to make sense of the princess seam that came to an unsteady rest just above the line of his ribs. The clinging fabric felt nothing like the one his mother had been buried in, it felt.

Dirty.

(or) Billy digs a grave

1. Doll Parts

Author's Note:

I am once again asking: Please enjoy this impulsive garbage.

Summary for the Chapter:

(or) pretty on the inside.

Billy was like an oil painting that had been around for a thousand years. Pretty in the right lighting, hideous in the swell of nightfall. All rough edges and smeared color, full of broken things that cut through the air and rattled like shattered glass whenever anyone got too close, bristling and blowing with the 75mph wind that tumbled through his soul.

Billy thought it was breathtaking.

Painted with split knuckles and broken ribs. Matted hair tangled with dried blood. Busted lips painted red, color spilling down his chin when he smiled too wide at his reflection.

He liked it messy and hideous. Did everything he could to destroy his precious image, the golden boy.

And he had always been pretty. Like a girl; sparkly eyes and curly hair. Neil told him, always, that someone would come along and color outside the lines. Scribble over the image his mother had left behind and it was eerie. Prophetic, even, because Billy was breakable in the face of adversity.

Missing doll parts flinching against hurt and agony until it became commonplace. Until he grew tired of gluing himself back together every night under the light of the moon.

His face was beautiful like a sculpture carved from stone, or a window into the face of his mother and her mother, but.

Billy *himself* was like a cardboard box full of glass.

Billy on the inside was sharp.

And crude.

And violent, when the mood struck him. Ask anyone and they'd tell you; *guy's like a train barreling through an apartment building.*

And he was.

A glorious, terrible, beautiful, ravenous storm brewing in the open sea.

Billy hadn't known girls could be like that, too.

He knew they were soft. Pretty and delicate and sometimes tough when they had to be. His mother had been like that--brazen. Flighty and aggressive in a different way, like when the sun emerges from the clouds and shines too brightly.

She was perfect in her femininity. Billy looked nothing like his mother because she dressed like a wood nymph, all sheer fabric and dresses that defied gravity. Her hair was blonde and curly, always pinned back with clips and beautiful scarves and Billy wanted *desperately* to look like her.

Film star beauty.

Painted lips, soft hands. When she threw herself off the bridge he brushed his fingertips over the fabric in her closet and tried to imagine what it would feel like to have the world at your feet.

She was so beautiful it felt like swallowing tar. Hot and boiling on a summer's day.

Billy pulled something from the rack, ran his fingers around the liquid soft fabric of his mother's favorite dress; the white one with the pearl neckline that felt like water settling around his shoulders. They said she was going to be buried in this one and Billy hated it.

Hated that something so beautiful, so *delicate* would rot away in the cool, damp earth.

He sat in front of her vanity and watched the light twinkle against the jewels that littered the countertop; rubies, emeralds, opal stone cut into neat shapes. When he was a child Billy's mother would let him play with her rings because they made good skipping stones in the pond out back.

We'll always find more, his mother would say, and it was true. Neil spared no expense in making her shine like a million stars as if she didn't already steal the air from every room. Pocket it in her velvet handbags for safekeeping.

Billy put a ring on each finger and studied his reflection in the pristine vintage mirror.

He looked like a rat.

A rat in a pretty dress, playing pretend for a day.

The front door slammed open and Billy put the dress back on its hanger.

The girl on the T.V. wasn't like his mother at all she was like a hurricane.

Not soft or feminine, but smoldering. Alight with power and freedom as she strutted around the stage. She looked like her eyes were swimming in water; thick black makeup smudged around green orbs, hair messy and tangled, legs littered with bruises that peaked through the holes in her stockings as the lights threw her into disarray. Bruises the size of thumbs, and. Cigarette burns.

Slut kiss girls won't you promise her smack

is she ugly on the inside

is she ugly from the back...

The woman was a disaster packaged in something almost beautiful but not quite. Like the prom queen moments after winning her crown fair and square, tear stained makeup and fleeting promises of eternal beauty. She flung herself around the stage, dress ripped to tatters as the hands of the audience tried to tear away pieces of her flesh.

The woman's fingers were bruised and bloody as she wailed away on her guitar. Nails cracked and worn with the weight of vengeance. With each press of her lips against the microphone the color oozed outside the lines of her mouth until she looked like a living dead girl and Billy.

He had never seen someone so beautiful.

The first time he put on a dress for real it had been an homage to his silver screen queen.

Black shift dress. Baby doll sleeves. Torn stockings and barrettes in his hair.

Kinderwhore they called it.

Billy stood awkwardly in front of the mirror in the bathroom and tried to make sense of the princess seam that came to an unsteady rest just above the line of his ribs. The clinging fabric felt nothing like the one his mother had been buried in, it felt.

Dirty.

Sinful. Instantly cloaked in assumptions; he does heroin. He's a a bum and a loser in search of something the music can't give him so he calls for it in the sting of a needle. Billy bit down on his lips until they bled.

The color ran thick like maple syrup over the skin of his face, bringing out the blue in his eyes as it slithered down his chin. As it caught in the stubble-rough landing of his jawline.

Billy looked like a mess.

Instantly, he was addicted. The first time Billy saw her he knew; that

was his own image reflected back at him from the fifteen inch screen.

He began looking for inspiration wherever he could find it.

Debbie Harry, Freddie Mercury, Joan Jett, David Bowie. Women and men. Gods. Heroes. Feminine and masculine and dirty.

Courtney Love was always his favorite.

Filthy. Absolutely gut wrenching. Every time he watched her perform it was like his spleen was being ripped out and Billy couldn't escape the way he saw so much of himself reflected in her. All his rage and discomfort, his *fury* amplified by a million.

So he tried to emulate it.

Billy shopped around local thrift stores to find leopard print jackets and peasant tops. Dresses that hung wide or snuggled against the swell of his hips, kitten heels that brought much needed length to his hamburger legs and when he brought them home, always through the backdoor and stuffed carefully into a trash bag, Neil would raise an eyebrow.

Playing dress up?

Billy would grimace. *Max is lookin' to be a Debbie Harry for Halloween. 'M helpin' her find the prefect dress.*

And Neil drank like the answers sawm in a bottle of gin, so.

He would raise a fist at that. Never fully convinced but satiated, content with Billy playing the perfect older brother. His nose would bleed on the nights when Neil couldn't shake the impression that his son was a faggot but that was as far as it went.

Max never asked questions and Billy never told her the truth; that he felt more like himself when Courtney Love stared back at him in the mirror.

She sat with him sometimes.

Watched him apply his mother's lipstick, carefully at first and then all at once when the music carried him down.

*Black lung coat and your little crown
That's the crown that you get for falling down
Hey baby, let me look in your eyes
I see you standing in a weird red light...*

"Why do you listen to this shit?" Max wrinkled her nose. Like a freckled bunny rabbit, it was kind of ridiculous. "She screams so fuckin' loud, you can't even understand what she's--"

"Mascara."

"Why? I know girls who would *kill* for your eyelashes."

Billy snapped his fingers. Max handed over the little black tube with a trademark eye roll, resting her chin in her hands as Billy repeated the process of careful application and then careless destruction of his hard work.

"Look prettier when you keep it nice," She snapped.

And Billy just chuckled. "I don't wanna look nice."

Max stared at him, popping a jaw breaker into her mouth. "Why not? Isn't that the whole point of makeup, to look pretty?"

Billy scrubbed at his eyes, warmth flooding his stomach again at the way seafoam blue stood out against the black ring. Like carefully crafted bruises, nothing like the ones Neil gave him. He shrugged his shoulders.

"That's fuckin' predictable." He sat on the bed, pushing the hem of his skirt to roll the nylon against his legs. "Predictable is boring and we aren't boring, Maxine."

"Using makeup and clothes to look worse, that's new." Max grumbled,

but she watched with glowing eyes as Billy began scraping his nails down the length, creating runs in the delicate fabric.

"You gonna sit there yapping or are you gonna help?" He bitched.

Max slid to her knees in front of him, getting to work tearing holes into the stockings the way she knew Billy liked.

It was therapeutic, almost, having the help.

"I like when you do Blondie." She said after a while. "Fuck ton less work and Courtney makes you aggressive. She's got the energy of a horny dude, it's messed up."

Billy smirked.

It was always more fun to play pretend with Max and her bitchy voice tethering him to the ground. He feared that, without it, he'd get lost in the feeling of freedom. Fly too close to the sun or something, catch on fire when he inevitably missed the tell-tale creek of the floorboards that meant Neil was listening in.

Max annoyed the hell out of him, but.

She kept him safe. Why, he didn't know. Maybe she really was interested in the whole thing, electing to believe that every boy wanted to be a girl because the alternative meant her brother was sick in a way that couldn't be cured.

Billy stood, slipping on the kitten heels while Max held his hand.

He admired his handiwork.

"Gotta hand it you," Max whistled, low like a wolf. "Gets shittier every time we do it."

"Shut up, brat." But Billy was grinning.

For Max, that was a compliment.

*Don't blush when I rip you open
Hey baby, let me look in your eyes
As you go off into your weird red light..*

He ran his hands down the soft fabric, relishing the way the hem tickled the sensitive skin of his thighs.

He was pretty.

Not like his mother, not like Courtney Love, but.

Uniquely himself.

Max cocked her head to the side. "Don't you get tired of getting all dressed up with nowhere to go?"

Billy bristled. "Oh yeah? And where could I go in San Fran that wouldn't skin me on the spot for dressing like a bitch?"

"Castro." The gay area.

Billy felt his cheeks darken. He thought about it for a second; the lights, the thralls of people just letting the love in. Being themselves.

He shook his head, turning back to the mirror with a glare. "Yeah, okay. I'll get right on that."

"Cool, I'll just fetch my coat." Max turned to leave, chucking when Billy trapped her with an iron grip. "Relax, spaz. Neil would kill us *both* if he saw you looking like that."

And.

She was right. Billy had thought about it countless times before, what would happen if he threw a jacket over his baby doll dress and slipped out the back door one night. How the cool air would feel on the bare skin of his thighs, but. That's all it ever was. Just speculation.

Only dreams.

Knowing his luck he'd catch Neil in the hallway after his midnight piss and that'd be it. They'd never get the blood out of the wallpaper.

"Looks like we're stuck playing pretend." Billy patted absently at his spring of messy curls, refusing to let the sadness seep through but Max noticed immediately. Perceptive little shit. She held up a finger, disappearing through the crack in the door. A second later she was back with her polaroid camera.

"Smile."

"No fuckin' way," Billy snarled. He could already imagine it; Neil digging through his sock drawer to find the pot he was always accusing Billy of smoking, only to stumble across something else.

Something worse.

Billy's ribs began to ache with the phantom memory of those fists planting like flower bulbs in fresh soil. He bruised easily, like an overripe peach.

Not everyone knew that about him, but. He did.

Max frowned. "Come on, we could send them to Courtney's P.O. box, I'm sure she'd be flattered."

Billy shook his head, tears swamping his vision as Max lifted the camera. The flash was blinding. Billy lunged for it, swearing as Max slipped past his grip. She took another picture.

And another.

And then another, until polaroid's littered the floor like fallen leaves on the dirty ground. Billy had tears rolling down his cheeks, ruining his makeup by the time she finally stopped. He held out his hand. "Max, just. Give that fuckin' thing to me. *Now*, we gotta burn this shit, alright? We gotta--"

But she wasn't listening, she was staring at the first image she had taken, when Billy was caught off guard. Max was *absorbed* in it, eyes glittering with something Billy had never seen before.

He snatched the picture from her hands and lifted it up to his face, brow wrinkled in disgust until--

This wasn't anything like staring in the mirror.

It felt more immediate, more real as Billy examined the image of a flawless stranger. Of a woman.

Of Courtney Love.

"Pretty," Max said.

And.

Yeah. He was.

They started taking pictures every time Billy got dressed up.

Max would help him get ready and then they'd do little photoshoots in his bedroom. He was a reluctant subject at first, awkward in his own skin until she suggested they smoke a joint before each session.

"To loosen you up a little, dick wad."

"What kinda brother would I be if I let my kid sister smoke pot?" Billy shook his head. "Absolutely not, Max."

She shrugged. "Then you do it."

So, he did.

And it helped. They switched up the music, finding it easiest to shoot to *The Smashing Pumpkins*, played with lighting and mood until she was satisfied with the "vibe," made immortal on film.

The images Max captured were like moments in time, archived in the shoebox under his bed. Billy looked like a rock star in every one--Debbie Harry on some days, Courtney on others; hair messy, cigarette trapped between his fingers, stockings ripped to shreds.

Max admitted that Courtney was her favorite, after a while, so that's

the one that stuck.

And Billy loved every picture she took. Loved her artistic eye, obvious in the way she moved his lamp around the room to capture his features *just* so. Every session was serious like she was the photographer at Rolling Stone and he was her subject for the week.

It was addictive.

They had been taking pictures every night for a month when Neil caught them in the act.

The first punch felt like a bomb had gone off in his head, and Billy hit the floor without so much as a fight.

He remembers blood on the carpet.

Blood in his hair. On the walls. A splitting pain in his ribs and between his legs.

Keep digging your own grave, William.

Max patched him up after Neil's car tore out of the driveway.

"I'm sorry Billy." He hadn't realized she was crying. He ran his fingers over her cheek. "It's all my fault, I didn't mean--"

"I felt pretty." He said.

They stopped taking pictures after that.

Moving to Hawkins, Indiana was like stepping off the Earth and floating through space.

Billy felt weightless.

Every mistake, every hidden secret cloaked in baby doll dresses and leopard print coats had been left in San Francisco where they belonged. Stuffed in the back of his closet with the polaroid's they were able to tape back together.

He tried to forget the way it made him feel.

"You're the prettiest boy I've ever seen."

It wasn't meant to be a compliment. Billy could tell that from the way Steve's lips curled into a snarl.

He pushed his way into Billy's space, clearly drunk and high off *something* that made his pupils swallow the milky brown of his eyes.

Steve looked like he was swimming.

There were track marks in his arm. "You're like a vision," He reached out to touch, to feel, flinching back when Billy slapped his hand away.

"I don't know what the *fuck* you think you're doing, Harrington--"

"I think I'm in love with you."

And Billy had thought the same thing, the first time they ran into each other at the gay bar in Indianapolis, but. People talked.

Hawkins talked, like the city itself was an entity with a pulse and conscience that had been shot to shit in the eighties. Billy did his best to glare. "You don't love me, pretty boy."

"No, I." Steve grinned. He was high as a fucking kite. "I do. You're my guardian angel." He laughed hysterically, in a way that made Billy's skin crawl.

"What, your dealer tell you that?" He huffed.

And it was mean.

So fucking mean. If Steve was a junkie his skin wouldn't be so clear, so smooth. Like black cherries in milk, goddammit. Billy wanted to lap at the skin on his neck, taste the salt of his skin.

He wondered distantly if he'd be able to get high from it.

Probably. Steve smiled anyway. "Let me take you home."

"Such a fuckin' line," Billy said.

But he was already tugging pretty boy through the crowd.

Billy kept his dresses in the back of his closet where he kept his mother's suicide letters.

She had written more than one, consumed by her sadness in a way Billy had never understood until he had taken the fairy light inside him and smothered it.

Every once in a while, when Neil was out of the house and Max was at school or something, He'd take one out just to feel the weightlessness of the fabric settle against his skin.

Like little paper angels.

Like the whisper of something like hope but not quite, just out of reach.

He never did the full look anymore. Never put his heart and soul into it the way he had before, when Max was there to keep him from floating away, but.

Gradually he felt himself catch fire.

They had been together for three months when Steve peeled back the layers.

Neil was away on business, so Steve was sleeping over. Needed a shirt or sweats or to sleep in, catching sight of something bright red and shiny as he shifted the leather jackets at *Greatful Dead* t-shirts to the side to expose a stash of beautiful gowns that shone like an open sore against the soft light in Billy's bedroom.

Billy came through the open door, words dying on his lips as the bong in his hand shattered on the floor.

Steve held the dress up against the light, tongue poking out of his mouth in consideration.

"Max wants to be Debbie Harry for Halloween," Billy fished for his old excuse, eyes welling up with tears when Steve's jaw set in a firm line. "I'm helping her find the perfect dress, I--"

"Bill's--"

"That's not mine, Steve, I swear." Billy dropped to the floor.

Got on his fucking *knees*, hands level with his face in a silent prayer as he tripped over himself to rebuild the walls that had kept him safe. He was talking, spewing bullshit as Steve stood motionless against the closet door. Billy flung his arms around Steve's legs. Buried his face in his thighs, because.

He couldn't go through it again.

Wouldn't survive it.

"I never even seen that before, Stevie, *please*."

"Get up." Pretty boy commanded.

And.

Billy blinked teary, soulful eyes at him. "Huh?"

Steve shook his head. "I said stand *up*, baby. Get off the fucking floor."

Billy did. Steve watched him for a moment, expression unreadable. Billy prepared himself for the gut punch, the harsh word, the look of disgust in those eyes that had never shown anything but reverence for Billy, but it never came. In a single, syrupy slow motion Steve held the dress to Billy's throat, scanning him up and down in a way that left Bill naked and squirming.

He couldn't breathe. Couldn't think, as Steve smiled softly.

"Wanna see you." He said.

And. "What?"

"Can you put it on for me?" Steve asked. "Bet you look gorgeous. Like an angel, or a model or something--"

Billy let out a thick, wet sound. "I look like a beast, I'm--"

"No." Billy jumped when Steve nuzzled against his neck, the dress trapped like a gossamer curtain between them. "Bet you look like a deity. A goddess of rock n' roll. Like Courtney Love, right?"

And Billy had done a lot of things in his life. He was a builder of fortresses, a hider, an adventurer when the mood struck him. Billy protected himself and Max and his mother for as long as he could remember, carrying things that were too heavy for those with weaker shoulders, but.

He had never shown himself to someone he loved. No sugar, no cream, just.

Completely himself.

Billy took the dress and opened the safe in the corner. Pulled out his mother's makeup and painted himself into a masterpiece as Steve watched, motionless on the bed.

When he was done Billy was afraid to look in the mirror.

Terrified of what he'd see but Steve took him in his arms, peppering gentle kisses all along his face until Billy had built up enough courage.

"Ready? Steve whispered.

Billy let himself be turned around. Situated under the heavy sling of Steve's arm, until--

"Pretty."

Steve nodded. "Beautiful."

Notes for the Chapter:

All songs used in this chapter come from:

Pretty on the Inside, by Hole.

2. Candlelight

Summary for the Chapter:

(or) Your highness, I'm so high I cannot walk.

He's thrown out of sleep by the pads of five fingers tracing a map through his curls. Ruffling the spiraling strands from their place in his bun and ghosting around the shell of his ear to pull him back through time. Billy blinks sleep away and the final tendrils of his dream get pulled out from under him. Steve's chest rises and falls, rises and falls, like a boat lapping gently on the waves.

Billy doesn't even think he's awake. Like maybe Steve's petting Billy's head in his sleep, until, "Were you ever gonna tell me about it?"

It's raining.

Billy thinks it's raining. Dots of moisture cloud the window and streetlamps cast a vision throughout the room, painting everything in the light of disruption. Outside there's a flash of thunder and Billy feels like a minute man. Smaller than a speck of dust--floating through the air while he swallows around Steve's question.

Was he ever going to come clean.

Billy snuggles closer to the boy in his bed, drawn forward by Steve's fingers trailing down his arm and coming to rest against his waist, in. What can only be called a hug. It's awkward and one of Billy's legs is asleep but it feels important, cataclysmic, when Steve squeezes once. And then twice, as if Billy needs to be reassured.

"It's okay if you weren't," Steve laments softly. "Shit can be hard."

"I didn't think--" Billy whimpers, only. He doesn't know. What he *thought* or which feelings crumble, even now, like stones around his feet.

He's shaking.

Billy doesn't realize he's shaking, until Steve shushes him and plants a

kiss right over the scar on his eyebrow.

"It was a secret?" He asks.

And Billy collapses against the boy again. "Yeah."

"I get that."

"Max wasn't supposed to know either."

Steve shifts, turning his words against Billy's forehead with each tender drag of his lips. "Max knows?"

"She took pictures."

"Wait," Steve tries to sit, "She took *photographs* of you dressed like Courtney Love? When?"

And.

Billy watches the rain fall against the windowpane. It clinks, like. Diamonds falling into a bucket. Audible even over the thunder of Steve's heart dancing like a ballerina in his chest. Billy's mother said it was good luck to sleep with the window open during a thunderstorm. That welcoming rain was a strength and not a weakness. He thinks maybe it was supposed to mean something else, like.

The seasons of a person's life.

Weathering the storm, or whatever. But he gets up anyway, Steve's arms opening nice and smooth for Billy to expose their world to the chill of nightfall. It's just a crack in the glass, really, barely an inch in height but the room smells of spring. Honeydew and blooming flowers.

Steve hums, as if resting on a cloud. "I love the sound of the rain."

He looks beautiful. Fresh from sleep with blankets pooled around his waist. Steve watches Billy through serious, half lidded eyes.

"You're so beautiful, Billy."

"No. I'm not."

Steve looks like he wants to say something. A thousand words, a hundred times, but. He rolls onto his side and pats the empty space next to him instead, like. Come to me--where chains will never bind you.

Billy shakes his head. Throws his weight nervously from foot to foot, which. Makes Steve snort and sit up. The sprawl of his legs kick over the edge of the mattress. Steve runs a hand over his face and through his hair before looking at Billy with squinty eyes. "You don't want to come to bed, sugar?" He asks.

And Billy shakes his head again.

"How come?"

"I dunno, pretty boy." Billy turns back to the window, watching the water trickle over the glass. A million stars falling to kiss the Earth right here in Hawkins. "Got an hour to kill?"

Somewhere, to the left, Steve settles against the mattress once more.

The flick of a lighter and a soft inhale of love makes Billy turn to watch. Smoke curls from Steve's nose, light catching the honey brown in his hair when he grins and holds the cigarette out to Billy. Like an offering. A semblance of peace.

"Got nothing but time, sugar," Steve says.

And Billy watches him bring the smoke to his lips once more.

He crosses the distance between them, plush carpet fibers reaching like phantom limbs to grab hold of his feet with each step. The mattress, Billy's space on the bed, feels cool to the touch. As if he's been gone for days or weeks while the earth settled thick with rest.

Steve holds out the cigarette again, a question in his eyes, and.

Billy takes it. "I guess I'm just afraid." He says, leaning back against the headboard and allowing the smoke to wither on its place in the ashtray.

Steve tugs the blankets up around their hips, curling against Billy's side to run fingers up his back. Five and then ten, over and over until Billy feels the tension bleed from his veins. He's exhausted.

"You're afraid to lay with me?" Steve asks, and.

"Afraid in general."

Steve nods. Like it makes sense, like. "It's normal to feel that way after sharing so much of yourself with someone."

Billy lays back against the mattress. "Maybe we don't have to talk about it any more tonight." He says. Because it hurts--every part of him feels alight with pleasure, with agony, at having the cobwebs cleaned away from his most intimate secret.

Steve lets Billy slip under the weight of his arm, lets Billy press his face into the crook of his neck, and. Doesn't ask any questions after that.

The rain falls. The Earth sleeps, and.

It feels almost like healing.

The dresses make their way from the back of his closet like the inch of hot tar along pavement.

Slowly, at first. Hardly discernable in their transition from secrecy.

Billy almost doesn't notice that the red dress gets hung on the front rack until days later.

When he's digging around for his only thermal sweater among a pile of denim jackets. It's March and the nights haven't given up their hold on ice covered tree limbs or heavy mist on windows, so. He's sick with cold. Desperately clinging to layers of navy blue fabric.

Billy shifts the hangers to the side in his search. The feeling of leather against his cheeks is as welcome as an old friend until.

Satin.

Soft as baby's breath, bursts like fireworks against his skin. Billy's submerged in his wardrobe at this point, tangled in hoodies and jackets and long johns the color of cloudy skies, so he paws around at first. Startled away and then drawn forward, into the dark.

Surely he wouldn't have hung the dress up front and *center*, like. Neil doesn't go through his shit on a daily basis in search of ammunition. Billy steps back and thinks no, surely he would've been smarter than that. *Sharper*, than that.

But on the second sweep of his closet. It sticks to his finger prints, tearing and dissolving layers skin until red satin fuses with bone. A dress and torn stockings shine in the chilly spring air, hung together on a crotched hanger his mother left behind.

Billy grapples for sense, for.

A reason.

Why would it be resting where the world could see? He takes the hanger from the rack and holds the dress up to his face, shocked as he was the first time he'd seen it. The coral fabric clashes terribly with yellow and blue yarn, combining to create some kind of perverted color wheel right there in Billy's bedroom. It hurts his eyes--his heart and soul--stinging like salt in a wound to remember how many times this moment has found its way into his life.

The wardrobe, the dress.

The smooth slide from fear to peace and back again.

It's beautiful.

Max throws herself on the couch and uses the toe of her boot to nudge the meat of Billy's thigh where it rests against a bowl of popcorn. He's too caught up in *Saved by the Bell* and Albert's right dimple to notice she's got her foot on Susan's prized lavender cushions.

And mud on her boot, and in turn--mud on *Billy*.

"What are you doing on Friday, dipshit?" She asks.

Billy sticks a kernel behind his molars, swatting Max's foot away from where her toe digs just right on the bruise Steve left last night. He grumbles something noncommittal, like there couldn't be anything more important than Albert's curls. The way he gets them so perfect and shiny as if each one was swirled on top of a waffle cone by God himself before Albert walked on set, and--

Max nudges him harder. "Hello, Earth to Billy?"

Billy sighs, refusing to turn away from the set. "What is it, Maxine?"

"I *asked* what you were doing on Friday."

"I *dunno*, what we're doing on Friday." Billy feeds himself another handful of popcorn, glancing down at Max's boot *again*. "Probably going to Indianapolis with Steve--get your *foot off the fucking couch*, dude." Billy uses the hand not holding his popcorn to fucking.

Shove her boot to the ground.

Max goes easy, reaching for the popcorn with both hands like a gremlin. "So let me come with."

"Why the fuck would I do that?"

"Because," The kid groans, tossing her head back on the arm of the couch, "Homecoming's in three weeks."

Max tosses a piece of kettle corn into the air and catches it with flawless accuracy, something Billy's envied since their first movie night as brother and sister. He peeks at her from the corner of his eye, watching her catch piece after piece, judging the nervous flush on the bridge of her nose with carefully guarded concern. Like Max'll bite him if he hands over his full attention.

Billy tosses his arm over the back of the couch and makes himself comfortable. Whatever the brat wants; she's gonna have to work for it.

"Thought Homecoming was stupid."

"I never said that."

"You did, actually," Billy snorts, turning back to the T.V. "Last week, when your weird little friend said that the Wheeler boy asked her to go. You said, and I'm quoting, 'homecoming is for mouth breathers.'"

Max pokes him again with the sole of her filthy disgusting boot and Billy grips painfully at her ankle, laughing at the noise she makes and then wincing when she kicks his bicep.

"Ow, watch it short stop." He growls, but.

It's only half serious. Max's face is full on beet red when she rights herself, tucking her hair behind her ears and fixing Billy with a glare.

One that she had to have learned from him.

Asshole.

"William." She says. Calm. Measured. "I want to go to homecoming and you're going to help me do that."

He snorts, pointedly ignoring the shiver that rolls down his spine at the way Max cocks her head to the side, like. A predator watching its prey.

If Steve were here right now this would be a done deal, the three of them hashing out which cassettes to bring on the road trip and pooling money for snacks, because. Max and Steve together are a lethal combination.

They agree on everything; music, movies, sports teams. Billy's always outnumbered, always ganged up on when the two of them put their mind to it.

He watches the red on Max's face turn light pink and then purple when he asks.

"This is about that girl. Isn't it?"

Billy expects the pillow to the head which is why he dodges it so easily. Max swings her legs over the side of the couch and takes off

toward her room, red hair swirling like a tornado behind her as Billy calls bullshit on himself.

"Come on, Max, I was just kidding--"

"Like fuck you were." She says. And then the door to Max's bedroom slams shut behind her, the pictures on the wall vibrating loosely in her wake.

The dress.

The red dress, satin and perfect and whole, makes its way from the front of Billy's closet like a shot in the dark.

Lethal, deadly in its dissent toward the shadows once more. He buries it under the versions of himself that wish to be hidden. Protected and held close to his heart--jackets and tee shirts and zip up hoodies that smell like cigarettes and night air and SteveSteveSteve.

The aloof bully, the. Monster that can't find its way home--stares back at him once the wardrobe is sealed like a tomb under the glow of his bedroom lamp. Every morning Billy dresses as a version of himself that feels like a mask. Plastic, cold and hard and so.

Fake.

Phony.

Ridiculous, but. He can never bring himself to open the door all the way for fear that red satin will somehow crawl from the recesses like a slouching beast and tear his arm off. Devour his whole family once the fabric settles like a weight around his shoulders, so.

Every night Billy sleeps with a ruler trapped between the handles to keep the wardrobe sealed. Almost as if the dress itself were a monster, a vampire hungry in its search for blood. And Billy feels ridiculous.

Dramatic.

Hormonal, even. Sleeping with the light on, imagining every

phantom sound as himself digging a path through the dirt.

He sleeps with a rosary around his fist.

The beads are blush pink, a shade reminiscent of candlelight by Avon, and every night Billy prays for strength. For the path to be cleared, the way to be firm and narrow, because he feels himself slipping.

The lamp in his bedroom flicks off with a snap of his fingers and then Billy's sliding between cool sheets. Burying his face in the pillow and breathing in the scent of a boy that disappears like smoke on the wind when Neil is home from work.

If everyone just wants to feel pretty.

Billy feels the current of sleep tugging him under, body falling warm and pliant against his sheets, when something slides soft and gentle against the carpet by his door.

He sits, heart racing like a wild antelope, taught with anticipation as he pads across the room. There, on the floor, is a cutout from a magazine. An advertisement for a place called Sophia's. The catalogue has been folded and refolded several times so that the page is creased and worn, all tattered edges and wrinkled lines, but there, at the center of the page, is a dress.

It's silk.

Billy doesn't have to feel the brush of fabric against his skin to know the way it would feel like bubbles popping against his arms. The dress itself is pink. Vibrant and subtle at the same time, the color of candlelight by Avon.

It's Billy's favorite color in the whole world.

The neckline is straight and modest, straps delicate against a simple bodice that ends just above the waist to create something beautiful. A princess seam, Billy thinks it's called. There's a bow at the back, resting like a star on the top of the tree, accenting the tasteful slit that runs from calf to floor and Billy thinks, instantly, about that night.

With the makeup and a promise that beauty exists as a boy wrapped in satin.

Steve made him feel like that.

He wonders if Max has ever felt like that. Like a polished ruby resting on her mothers vanity, the brush of fabric and lace carrying her to the doorway of herself.

He wonders if she wants to feel seen and validated, and.

Pretty.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm going to continue this work!

This was a really short chapter, but it felt right to end it here for now. Please let me know what you think and have a Happy New Year!

Also: There's a mood board for this over on the ole tumble weed:

<https://passivenovember.tumblr.com/post/640158836496416768/the-skull-on-the-shelf-that-bares-my-name>